

MAUNA LOA SUMMIT TRAIL IN A DAY

Trip Report by: Gerad Dean

Trip Date: January 13, 2013

During a recent trip to Hawaii (Big Island) I wanted to see if I could complete the Mauna Loa Summit Trail from car->summit->car in a day. The trail, from trailhead to summit, is about 19.5 miles in length and boasts approximately 7000' elevation gain. It is a long, steady, and generally gradual climb. The trail, marked by ahu (rock cairns), is nearly entirely above tree line and makes its way across a stark landscape of recent lava flows. There is essentially no vegetation, making the entire trail exposed to the sun with very few shaded breaks. It also lacks any reliable source of fresh water, so I would need to be entirely self-sufficient on this day.

I began my run/hike at the Mauna Loa trailhead at 6:20 AM. I felt awake and excited for the journey to come. I made my way slowly at first, heeding caution in the pre-dawn morning. The first mile or two cut through high-elevation forests. The tread was easy to follow as it was the obvious and only unobstructed route through the vegetation. A brilliant sunrise soon presented over the red glow of the active Kilauea caldera, 3000' feet below me. After climbing to about



Sunrise along Mauna Loa summit trail. Photo: Gerad Dean.

7500', the vegetation gave way to the alpine environment, and the trail was apparent only by a string of ahu. The ahu were difficult to track in the early morning light, backed by the uniform colors and



A rare tree along the trail. Can you see the trail and ahu? Photo: Gerad Dean.

textures of the surrounding lava flow. Only a few times did I lose the trail for more than a few minutes. Maintaining a pace resembling anything close to a run was challenging over the rough terrain of the lava. There was no obvious trail tread through the volcanic terrain.

I reached Pu'u 'Ula'ula (Red Hill Cabin, 7.5 miles from trailhead, 10,000' elevation) about 2:15 into my journey. I

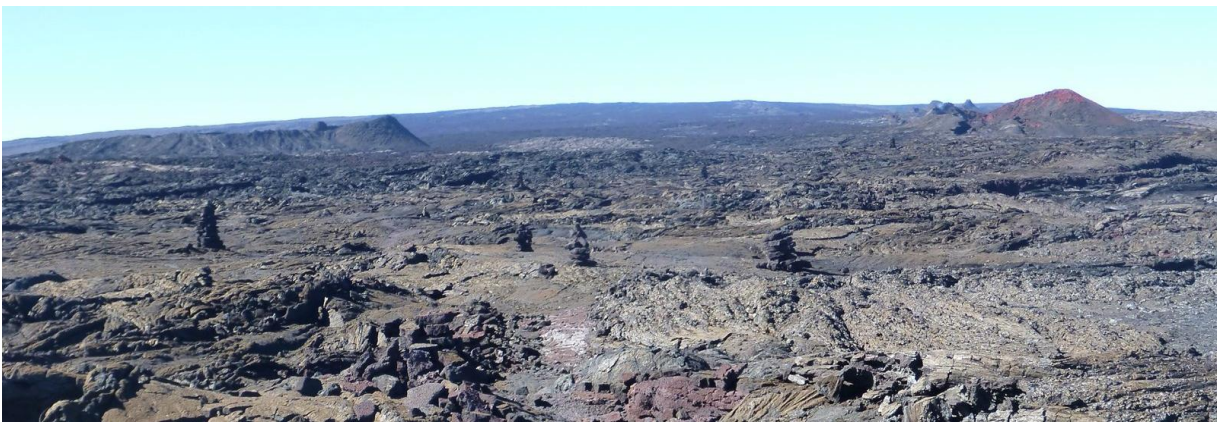
spent a bit of time at Red Hill Cabin, wrote in the journal and had a look around. My legs felt tired from a 19 mile, out & back run I did from Waipio Valley to Waimanu Valley on the north side of the island two days prior. My spirits were riding high with the excitement of being on this sacred mountain. It seemed I rode my spirits rather than my legs for much of the day. Leading up to my departure for Hawaii, I had

not run much or been consistent with my training. It was winter at my home in Northern California, and for the previous month my focus had been with Nordic, piste, and backcountry skiing.

Once back on the trail I had my first view of Mauna Kea, Hawaii's highest point (13,803', about 120' higher than Mauna Loa), to the northeast. I continued on the summit trail, linking ahu, and trying my best to maintain some semblance of a running pace. I found my pace mostly hampered by the technicality of the trail and terrain rather than the elevation at this point.



Red Hill Cabin. Photo: Gerad Dean.



Typical scene with ahu marking the trail. Photo: Gerad Dean.

By noon I had covered 17 miles and climbed 6500'. It was here that I reached the first junction along the trail. One path led to the Mauna Loa summit cabin (which interestingly does not reside on the true summit, but on the south rim of the caldera), the other path to the mountain's true summit. I took

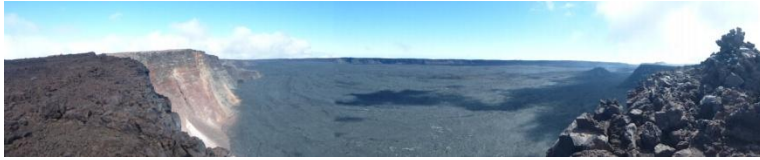


Mauna Loa's summit is seen on the horizon. Photo: Gerad Dean.

the north route to the true summit, about 2.5 trail miles distant. By now it was the elevation that affected my ability to run. I walked most of the remaining distance to the summit. Fortunately, I was not feeling the typical symptoms of Acute Mountain Sickness, such as headache or lethargy, as I feared I might. Standing quickly after bending down I would feel a rush of lightheadedness and slight dizziness, but that was all. The previous day I hiked about 14 miles along the coastline to

view the point where the active lava flow is pouring into the sea. That night I drove to Namakanipaio Campground at about 4,000', before finishing the remainder of the drive to the trailhead at 6,600' very early in the next morning. I had traveled from sea level to 13,000' in less than a day.

I reached the 13,679' summit of Mauna Loa just before 2:00 PM, 6:48:48 total elapsed time



Summit caldera from north rim looking south with considerable distortion from the panoramic effect. The summit monument is seen on the right. Photo: Gerad Dean.

from the trailhead. There is a large summit monument here where I found everything from prayer flags to desiccated fruits and candy bars, plastic figurines and old clothes to coral, but amongst all these offerings I couldn't find a summit register. I spent about 15 minutes at the summit looking around, snapped a few quick photos – me at the summit monument, and some panoramic shots of the gigantic caldera above which I stood – then grabbed my gear and headed back whence I came.

As I headed down, clouds began building to the south and east. Dense fog engulfed me around 11,500'. Shortly thereafter a sporadic light drizzle fell. I stopped again at the Red Hill Cabin, curious if anyone had come by to sign the register while I was above. No one had. I added a few words to my previous entry, and continued on my way. It was difficult keeping the trail through the thick fog. There



Ahu show the way through the fog. Photo: Gerad Dean.



Light precipitation begins on the descent. Photo: Gerad Dean.

13:09:57 total round-trip time.

I completed what I had set out to do, and I am pleased with the accomplishment. I searched, but could not find documentation of anyone previously attempting or completing this round-trip endeavor within a day. If anyone has information to the contrary I am very interested to know of it. I am posting this as a fastest known time (FKT, see URL below), but I don't have any expectation that my record will prevail any longer than it takes someone else to gather the

was rarely an obvious tread to follow. I continuously scanned the landscape for ahu emerging from the fog. At the 8000' mark, the fog broke as the sun dropped to the horizon. I had maybe 30 minutes of good visibility before darkness fell. Here I was about 2.5 miles from the trailhead. My pace again was reduced to nearly a walk as I made my way across the undulating lava, scanning the limits of my headlamp for the next ahu. I returned to the trailhead shortly after 7:00 PM,



The author at the Mauna Loa summit monument. Photo: Gerad Dean.

motivation to challenge it. My pace during the entire outing was just less than 20 minutes per mile (this includes breaks and time spent not moving), hardly a blistering onslaught. My time could easily be crushed by someone with better familiarity with the trail, specific training for a Mauna Loa speed ascent, avoiding the trail during the dark, and avoiding stops for photos and register entries to touch on only a handful of factors. My intention was simply to see if I could safely complete the trail in a day; speed was a means to an end, rather than my primary objective. Mahalo for reading.

GPS data is here: <http://connect.garmin.com/activity/265337795>

FKT report is here:

<http://fastestknowntime.proboards.com/index.cgi?board=pacific&action=display&thread=393>

Additional Photos: <https://picasaweb.google.com/114072471192974340390/MaunaLoaRunHI#>

MY GEAR:

Clothing: Nylon cap w/ shroud, fleece hat, sunglasses, silk weight short sleeve t-shirt, silk weight long sleeve t-shirt, nylon windbreaker, polyester gloves, polyester shorts, cotton bandana, wool running socks, Adidas Adios shoes

Safety/comfort: UltrAspire Surge pack, Mylar emergency blanket, 1 ounce SPF 30 sunscreen, 1 ounce Vaseline, TP, 1 spare quart size Ziploc bag

Electronics: Garmin 310XT watch, small LED headlamp, iPhone with Offline Topo App map downloaded for the area, Panasonic Lumix TS4 camera

Food/drink: 2-12 ounce handheld water bottles, 1-12 ounce water bottle carried on pack, 1-64 ounce bladder carried inside pack, 20 S-caps, 12 Clif Shot blocks, 9 Clif Shot gels, 5 Clif bars (Note: I consumed 50 ounces of water, 8 S-caps, 12 Clif Shot blocks, 4 Clif Shot gels, and 4 Clif bars)